Have I Rejected the Pope?

Rev. Anthony Cekada

Note: *In his column in an April 1992* Remnant, *Michael Davies reprinted a favorable review of my recent study,* The Problems with the Prayers of the Modern Mass *(Rockford IL: TAN Books 1991). The editor of* The Remnant, *Walter Matt, appended his own commentary to the review, and stated that I have "apparently rejected the authority of the Pope." In a subsequent issue, Mr. Matt printed a letter to the editor attacking me on the same grounds.*

The charge is utterly false and unfairly portrays me as a schismatic. The following is a letter I sent to The Remnant *shortly after the first article appeared. After two letters and a phone call from me inquiring why this letter never appeared,* The Remnant *finally published it in late 1992.*

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Editor, *The Remnant:*

I commend Walter Matt and Michael Davies for their objectivity in printing a review of my study, *The Problems with the Prayers of the Modern Mass*. (The Remnant, April 31, 1992.) We have indeed often disagreed over the source of the problem in the post-Conciliar Church and over the solutions to be applied. Some of my past writings dealing with Mr. Matt and Mr. Davies, moreover, wandered off into personal attacks instead of coolly sticking to issues. Age makes one a bit wiser, and I apologize for any offense.

I must write, however, in order to correct Mr. Matt's unfortunate statement that "sedevacantists" — he lumps me among them — have "apparently rejected the authority of the Pope." I fear Mr. Matt has misunderstood something.

All traditional Catholics know the disastrous effects the changes produced. We resisted those changes as harmful to souls, even though they were approved with what purported to be the authority of the Church. All of us have grappled with the problem of how to reconcile the doctrine of the indefectibility of the one, true Church of Christ and her authority on one hand, with the state of the post-Vatican II Church on the other.

Traditional Catholics have offered various solutions. Some (including *The Remnant* and Mr. Davies, I assume) base their resistance to the changes on the notion that individual members of the post-Conciliar hierarchy are abusing

their authority. Others (sedevacantists) contend that men who have defected from the faith now occupy the Holy See and all (or most) episcopal sees, and that all such sees at present are therefore juridically vacant — or that there is at least a doubt present as to whether the current occupants of these sees obtained or retain juridical authority.

The sedevacantist position — I risk oversimplifying a complex issue — flows from two considerations: one of fact, the other of law.

1. Fact. Certain pronouncements of Vatican II and the post-Conciliar popes on religious liberty, ecumenism and various other doctrinal matters appear to contradict, sometimes word for word, previous Church teachings, or appear to propose as true certain teachings which the Church has condemned in the past. Those who adhere to the sedevacantist position would contend that such pronouncements represent a public defection from the Catholic faith.

2. Law. According to church law, public defection from the Catholic faith automatically deprives a person of all ecclesiastical offices he may hold. Theologians and canonists such as St. Robert Bellarmine, Cajetan, Suarez, Torquemada, and Wernz and Vidal maintain, without compromising the doctrine of papal infallibility, that even a pope may himself become a heretic and thus lose the pontificate. (Some of these authors also maintain that a pope can become a *schismatic*.) This possibility is recognized even by an authoritative commentary on the 1983 Code of Canon Law:

"Classical canonists discussed the question of whether a pope, in his private or personal opinions, could go into heresy, apostasy, or schism. If he were to do so in a notoriously and widely publicized manner, he would break communion, and according to an accepted opinion, lose his office ipso facto. (c. 194 §1, 2º). Since no one can judge the pope (c.1404) no one could depose a pope for such crimes, and the authors are divided as to how his loss of office would be declared in such a way that a vacancy could then be filled by a new election." (James A. Corridan et al. editors, The Code of *Canon Law: A Text and Commentary* commissioned by the Canon Law Society of America [New York: Paulist 1985], c. 333.)

Now, one who opposes the sedevacantist position may care to argue that members of the modern hierarchy are not guilty of heresy, or that (*pace* Robert Bellarmine and commentators on the 1983 Code) a pope cannot fall from office through heresy.

It is unfair and unreasonable, however, to assert that the sedevacantist — who merely puts two entirely defensible propositions together and draws a logical conclusion from them — has "rejected the authority of the Pope."

Such is tantamount to calling the sedevacantist a schismatic. But he is no such thing, as is evident from one highly respected commentary on the Code:

"Finally, one cannot consider as schismatics those who refuse to obey the Roman Pontiff because they would hold his person suspect or, because of widespread rumors, doubtfully elected (as happened after the election of Urban VI), or who would resist him as a civil authority and not as pastor of the Church." (Wernz-Vidal, *Ius Canonicum* [Rome: Gregorian 1937], 7:398, my emphasis.)

I concede (ruefully) that members of the sedevacantist camp have frequently adopted a rabid tone against others in the traditional movement. But sedevacantists aren't the only ones guilty of this. Their opposite numbers in the movement — partisans of positions similar to those of Mr. Davies or *The Remnant* or the St. Pius X Society — have in return consistently tried to demonize the sedevacantists.

All this poisons the atmosphere and makes impossible any rational discussion of a serious and complex issue.

It doesn't have to be this way. Recently the Rev. Donald J. Sanborn (*Catholic Restoration*, 2850 Parent, Warren MI 48092, December 1991 and May 1992) and the Most Rev. Richard Williamson ("Letter to Friends and Benefactors," St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary, RR1 Box 97 A-1, Winona MN 55987, April 1992) crossed swords (pens, actually) over the *sede vacante* thesis. While each strongly criticized the other's position, they both managed to do so without resorting to the nasty and irrational polemics which usually characterize such exchanges. An enlightening debate resulted.

I'm announcing, therefore, the foundation of a new school of thought for traditional Catholics who wish to debate the pope issue: "sedevacationism."

The first part is from sede — as in "Sit down." The second part is from vacation — as in "…and take a vacation from reading out of the Church those with whom you debate."

Anyone care to join?

In Christo,

The Rev. Anthony Cekada